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ABSTRACT

Theorists have proposed very different patterns of adult age changes in masculine and feminine personality attributes; while some have predicted an increase in cross-sex typed individuals among older adults, others have predicted an increase in androgynous individuals. A study was conducted to further investigate adult age differences in levels of masculinity and femininity and to examine perceptions of masculinity and femininity in male and female peers. Male (N=50) and female (N=50) college students (aged 18-23 years), male (N=50) and female (N=50) middle-aged adults (aged 38-55 years), and male (N=50) and female (N=50) elderly adults (aged 60-97 years) completed three Personal Attributes Questionnaires: one for themselves, one rating a typical same-sex, same-age peer, and one rating a typical opposite-sex, same-age peer. The results indicated that the proportion of sex-typed and cross-sex typed individuals decreased across age groups, the proportion of undifferentiated individuals increased across age grops, and the proportion of androgynous individuals remained constant across groups. Other results showed that young and middle-aged subjects rated male peers as more masculine than feminine and female peers as more feminine than masculine. While older subjects also rated female peers as more feminine than masculine, they rated male peers as equally masculine and feminine. (NRB)

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Masculinity and Femininity in Early, Middle, and Late Adulthood: Perceptions of Self and Peers

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Masculinity and Femininity in Early, Middle, and Late Adulthood: Perceptions of Self and Peers

Theorists, speculating about the impact of changing family structures and occupational roles, have proposed strikingly different patterns of adult age changes in masculine and feminine personality attributes. Gutmann (1975) hypothesized that sex roles in early adulthood are very polarized, with males displaying mostly masculine characteristics and females mostly feminine characteristics. In middle age, a reversal of polarized sex roles occurs with women becoming more aggressive, dominant, and self-centered and males more nurturant and affiliative. Thus, Gutmann predicts an increase in cross-sex typed individuals (masculine females and feminine males) among older adults.

Other theorists have suggested that while young adults maintain polarized sex roles, middle-aged and older adults are more likely to display a higher level of sex-role development, characterized by a tendency to integrate their masculine and feminine characteristics (Block, 1973; Sinnott, 1977). This model predicts an increase in the proportion of androgynous individuals across the adult years. While the empirical studies in this area have been more supportive of the hypothesis of increases in androgyny with age rather than cross-sex typing, it appears that age differences in masculinity and femininity are much more complex than either of the theories predict. For example, Sinnott (1982) had older adults complete the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem, 1974) and found that while males had equivalent levels of masculinity and femininity, females were higher on femininity than masculinity. Using the BSRI, Hyde and Phillis (1979) also found that older males were more androgynous than females, but they suggest that this may be because the masculinity scale of the BSRI is not appropriate for use with older women. A better measure of adult age differences in masculinity and femininity may be Spence and Helmreich's (1978) Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ). The Masculinity and Femininity scales on the PAQ are purported to measure dominance, self-assertion, and

instrumentality on the one hand and nurturance, interpersonal warmth, and expressivity on the other. Thus, the PAQ seems to be especially well-suited to measure the kinds of characterisitics that have been hypothesized to change during adulthood. However, while adult age differences on the PAQ have been investigated (Spence and Helmreich, 1979), the sample did not include elderly adults. Therefore, one purpose of the present study was to further investigate adult age differences in levels of masculinity and femininity.

Another related aspect of adult sex role development concerns perceptions of masculinity and femininity in male and female peers. Recently, Garnets and Pleck (1979) hypothesized that sex roles are less salient and have reduced importance in later adulthood. If sex roles become less salient as a person matures, gender should become a less useful dimension for evaluating self and others. This suggests that older subjects should be less sex-typed in their perceptions of male and female peers. Sharp, Candy, and Troll (1980) found no adult age differences in amount of sex-stereotyping when describing male and female targets. However, the question of age differences in perceptions of peers' levels of masculinity and femininity may not be fully answered with the technique used in the Sharp, et al. study. Rather than directly assessing how adults of different ages perceive same-sex and opposite-sex peers along a masculinity and femininity dimension, they simply asked subjects to describe a male and female they know. Therefore, in the present study, young, middle-aged, and elderly adults were asked to rate a same-sex and opposite-sex peer using Spence and Helmreich's (1978) Personal Attributes Questionnare (PAQ).

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 50 male and 50 female college students selected from a subject pool of students in introductory psychology (mean age=20.07 years; range=18-23 years), 50 male and 50 female middle-aged adults (mean age=46.65 years; range=38-55 years), and 50 male and 50 female elderly adults (mean

age=68.73 years; range=60-97 years). The middle-aged and elderly adults were recruited from community organizations.

Procedure

Subjects were asked to complete the 24-item version of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) (Spence & Helmreich, 1978). This questionnaire includes an 8-item Masculinity (M) scale assessing self-assertive, instrumental characteristics and an 8-item Femininity (F) scale assessing interpersonally-oriented, expressive characteristics. Each subject first completed the questionnaire using the standard self-rating instructions. Subjects were then instructed to complete two additional PAQ's, one rating a typical same-sex, same-age peer and one rating a typical opposite-sex, same-age peer. The order in which same-sex and opposite-sex targets were rated was counterbalanced.

RESULTS

Age Differences in Masculinity and Femininity

Subjects' self-ratings on the M and F scales were scored using Spence and Helmreich's (1978) standard scoring procedure. Mean M and F scores for young, middle-aged, and elderly females and males are presented in Table 1. A 2 (sex of subject) X 3 (age) X 2 (scale-M,F) ANOVA was performed. Significant main effects were found for sex [$F(1,294)=6.52$, $p<.05$], with higher combined scores for females than males, and for scale [$F(1,294)=57.44$, $p<.001$], with higher average F than M scores. The significant sex X scale interaction [$F(1,294)=40.43$, $p<.001$] indicated that, for all age groups combined, M and F scores were equivalent in males, but F scores were higher than M scores in females. There was also a significant age X scale interaction [$F(2,294)=7.01$, $p<.01$], indicating that while M scores were higher in the young and middle-aged than old adults, F scores were equivalent across age groups.

As a further test of the sex role reversal and androgyny models of adult

sex role development, we also examined whether the proportion of androgynous and cross-sex typed individuals was the same for the three age groups. We calculated median M and F scores for each age group (young, M=21, F=23; middle-aged, M=21, F=22; old, M=19, F=23.5) and then classified each subject (see Table 2) as feminine (above the median for F but not M), masculine (above the median for M but not F), androgynous (above the median on both scales), or undifferentiated (below the median on both scales). A 3 (age) X 4 (androgynous, same-sex typed, cross-sex typed, undifferentiated) chi-square test was significant [χ^2=14.61, $p<.05$]. The proportion of sex-typed and cross-sex typed individuals decreased across age groups, the proportion of undifferentiated individuals increased across age groups, and the proportion of androgynous individuals remained constant across groups.

Perceived Masculinity and Femininity in Peers

In order to examine whether the hypothesized reduction in sex role salience with age would influence perception of same-sex and opposite-sex peers, we performed a 2 (sex of subject) X 3 (age of subject) X 2 (sex of target) X 2 (scale-M, F) ANOVA on the PAQ ratings for male and female peers. Table 3 presents mean M and F scores for male and female targets. The following significant effects were found: target [$F(1,294)=29.94$, $p<.0001$], scale [$F(1,294)=4.67$, $p<.05$], sex X scale [$F(1,294)=8.92$, $p<.01$], age X scale [$F(2,294)28.93$, $p<.0001$], target X scale [$F(1,294)=407.35$, $p<.0001$], sex X age X target [$F(2,294)=3.98$, $p<.05$], and age X target X scale [$F(2,294)=18.65$, $p<.0001$]. For our purposes, the age X target X scale interaction was most interesting. It indicated that young and middle-aged subjects rated male peers as more masculine than feminine and female peers as more feminine than masculine. However, while old subjects also rated female peers as more feminine than masculine, they rated male peers as equally masculine and feminine.

DISCUSSION

Both the sex-role reversal and androgyny models of age changes in sex roles

predict age-related increases in masculinity for females and femininity for males. We found no evidence for these hypothesized age changes, but instead the data indicated lower levels of masculinity in both older males and females. While the results do not support either the sex-role reversal or androgyny models, the findings are remarkably similar to prior research. We replicated Sinnott's (1982) finding of greater F than M scores in females and equivalent M and F scores in males, but found that this pattern held across age groups and not just in the elderly.

There are two possible explanations for the obtained age differences in masculinity. Hyde and Phillis (1979) found that the number of adults categorized as androgynous increased with age for males but decreased for females. They suggest that this result may be an artifact of the measure they used. For the proportion of androgynous females to increase in old age, older females would need to endorse a greater number of masculine traits. However, the masculine items on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) are very "youth-oriented" (e.g. athletic, ambitious). That is, the items may not accurately reflect masculinity in later adulthood. This same criticism may apply to the PAQ, and if so, it may explain the pattern of age-related decreases in masculinity for both males and females. Perhaps it would be worthwhile for researchers to develop measures of masculine and feminine personality characteristics that are more appropriate for an older population.

Another possible explanation for the age differences in masculinity may be that older adults' roles do not require masculine behavior. Perhaps older adults have fewer opportunities to behave in instrumental ways than young or middle-aged adults. Although this explanation is speculative there are data that demonstrate masculinity and femininity vary as a function of life-situations (Feldman, Biringer, & Nash, 1981). Perhaps life events such as retirement and widowhood may make it difficult for older adults to exercise or further develop their instrumental qualities. This hypothesis is consistent with our categorical data which indicated that a decrease across age groups in

the proportion of sex-typed individuals was accompanied by an increase in the proportion of undifferentiated rather than androgynous individuals. Thus, older adults, especially males, may be displaying lower levels of sex-typed characterisitics rather than acquiring cross-sex characteristics. Future research needs to go one step further and directly assess how changes in adults' roles may contribute to fluctuations in masculinity and femininity across the adult years.

Finally, we found significant age differences in perceptions of levels of masculinity and femininity in male and female peers. Young and middle-aged subjects were sex-typed in their descriptions of male peers, who were rated as more masculine than feminine, and female peers, who were rated as more feminine than masculine. On the basis of Garnets and Pleck's (1979) hypothesis that sex roles become less salient with age, we predicted that older subjects would be less sex-typed than younger subjects in descriptions of peers. Consistent with this prediction, we found that older subjects rated male peers as equally masculine and feminine. However, older subjects' ratings of female peers as more feminine than masculine indicates sex-typed perceptions of female peers. Thus, our data do not provide unequivocal support for Garnets and Pleck's hypothesis. Again this may reflect a measurement problem (Hyde & Phillis, 1979). If the items on the PAQ M scale are not appropriate for an older population, it may have prevented the older subjects from describing older female peers in equally masculine and feminine terms. An alternative explanation is that Garnets and Plecks's hypothesis is not correct and that the older subjects were not less sex-typed in describing their male peers, only accurate. It is important to note that older subjects' perceptions of lower levels of masculinity in older male peers paralleled the actual age differences we obtained. It would not be surprising if our subjects were simply displaying a high degree of accuracy in describing their age peers. Ahammer and Baltes (1972) demonstrated that adults are more likely to misperceive members of other generations rather than their own. For example, they found that adolescents and

young adults viewed older adults as valuing autonomy less and nurturance more than the older adults actually did. Older adults descriptions of their peers more accurately matched the actual self-ratings. At this point it is not possible to decide whether older subjects' perceptions of older males as equally masculine and feminine reflects an accurate perception of age-related decline in masculinity in males or is evidence supportive of the hypothesis (Garnets & Pleck, 1979) that sex becomes a less salient variable in evaluating self and others as adults age. It may be useful to compare young and older adults' ratings of young and old male and female targets. If older adults really are less sex-typed in their views of others, perhaps they would be more likely to demonstrate this in descriptions of a target group they may have less knowledge about, such as young adults.

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TABLE 1

MEAN FEMININITY (F) AND MASCULINITY (M) SCORES AS A FUNCTION OF GENDER AND AGE[A]

GROUP	SCORE	
	F	M
FEMALES		
YOUNG	24.44 (3.88)	20.50 (4.68)
MIDDLE-AGED	23.80 (4.14)	20.76 (4.19)
ELDERLY	25.08 (3.87)	19.50 (4.31)
MALES		
YOUNG	22.34 (3.83)	22.06 (4.35)
MIDDLE-AGED	20.78 (4.00)	21.84 (4.23)
ELDERLY	21.56 (4.59)	19.68 (4.10)

[A]NUMBERS IN PARENTHESES ARE STANDARD DEVIATIONS

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF YOUNG, MIDDLE-AGED AND ELDERLY MALES AND FEMALES CLASSIFIED AS ANDROGYNOUS, SEX-TYPED, CROSS SEX-TYPED, AND UNDIFFERENTIATED

	CLASSIFICATION			
GROUP	ANDROGYNOUS	SEX-TYPED	CROSS SEX-TYPED	UNDIFFERENTIAT
FEMALES				
YOUNG	19 (38)	16 (32)	6 (12)	9 (18)
MIDDLE-AGED	21 (42)	15 (30)	5 (10)	9 (18)
ELDERLY	23 (46)	10 (20)	4 (8)	13 (26)
MALES				
YOUNG	16 (32)	16 (32)	11 (22)	7 (14)
MIDDLE-AGED	13 (26)	20 (40)	6 (12)	11 (22)
ELDERLY	13 (26)	17 (34)	4 (8)	16 (32)

[A]NUMBERS IN PARENTHESES ARE PERCENTAGES

TABLE 3

MEAN FEMININITY(F) AND MASCULINITY(M) SCORES FOR MALE AND FEMALE PEERS[A]

	TARGET			
	MALE PEER		FEMALE PEER	
SCORE	F	M	F	M
FEMALES				
YOUNG	14.38 (3.96)	23.22 (3.96)	22.28 (3.41)	18.66 (4.13)
MIDDLE-AGED	15.26 (5.37)	21.86 (4.68)	22.24 (4.61)	16.24 (4.12)
ELDERLY	19.62 (5.12)	20.06 (4.82)	22.50 (5.13)	17.44 (4.5)
MALES				
YOUNG	14.60 (4.39)	21.62 (4.2)	22.14 (3.79)	17.40 (4.07)
MIDDLE-AGED	16.80 (5.17)	20.18 (4.35)	22.44 (4.32)	15.10 (4.4)
ELDERLY	18.04 (5.12)	18.00 (5.12)	23.28 (4.68)	17.52 (5.62)

[A]NUMBERS IN PARENTHESES ARE STANDARD DEVIATIONS